

The Wycliffite Heresy

Authority and the Interpretation of Texts

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John Wyclif and the truth of sacred scripture

*De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*¹ constitutes Wyclif's most extended theoretical engagement with the nature of biblical meaning and the interpretative problems posed by biblical language. A part of his so-called *Summa Theologiae*,² it forms one of the corner-stones of his increasingly radical conceptualisation of a Church guided by an ideal *lex Christi* abstracted from scripture.³ It was written around 1377–78,⁴ after the first, and cataclysmic, volume of *De Civili Dominio*,⁵ his revisionist tract on the nature of *dominium* and its dependence on grace.⁶ *De Civili Dominio* resulted in Wyclif's being summoned to St Paul's in 1377 to answer charges of heresy; moreover, eighteen propositions from his book were condemned by Pope Gregory XI in a series of bulls dated 22 May 1377. William Woodford OFM wrote his *Determinatio de Civili Dominio*, and Nicholas Radcliffe OSB his *Dialogi* in refutation of Wyclif's views; a host of other monks and seculars joined in the fray.⁷ Thus beleaguered, Wyclif spent most of 1377–78 answering his critics.

De Veritate, though primarily a theoretical treatise on hermeneutics, is therefore also in the nature of a polemical tract, always aware of, and often addressing directly, the contemporary disputes. As the work progresses, its tone acquires a heightened stridency, from a more or less focussed study of scriptural signification in the first fifteen chapters, to an increasingly polemical engagement with issues of heresy, ideal priesthood, papal authority and dominion in the later sections. The present chapter will concentrate on Wyclif's hermeneutic principles and arguments, though it will not lose sight of the centrality of his polemics to his theories of right reading.

Indeed, a fundamental aspect of Wyclif's hermeneutics is intimately related to contemporary political and ecclesiological conflict. Because

of *De Veritate*'s embeddedness in a wide-ranging and developing dispute over dominion, Wyclif treats scripture above all as an ideologically empowering concept. His hermeneutic theory is therefore global in its vision of scripture, and attempts to exclude any troubling consciousness of the Bible as an anthology of texts written in varying modes, in different times by different people.⁸ Prior to *De Veritate*, Wyclif had completed a commentary on the whole of scripture – the *Postilla super totam bibliam*;⁹ he was therefore undoubtedly aware of the numerous complexities in and discrepancies between the various parts of scripture. A major polemical point of *De Veritate*, however, is that scripture is a unity of ideas in God's mind, and that all its parts lead to the same unchanging *veritas*: 'tota scriptura sacra est unum dei verbum' ('the whole of sacred scripture is one word of God', II.I I 2/4).¹⁰ This has its practical effects on Wyclif's procedure, so that what his work offers is a combination of general statements about biblical meaning and statements of peculiar specificity based on readings of particular passages, often selected, according to local needs and exigencies, from a range of very different scriptural texts. The methodological, and tonal, complexity of the work is, as a result, immense; and the conflict of differing modes of interpretation which I have sought to underline in this chapter demands that the reader bear in mind the developing polemical context of Wyclif's scriptural *lectio*.

The following account will proceed thus: an analysis of Wyclif's discussion of Judges 9 will be succeeded by individual treatments of some of the major theoretical nexus of the tract. These include, preeminently, the issues of metaphor and 'improper' language, 'authorial intention', contextual reading, the role of 'reason' in the interpretation of scripture, 'scriptural logic', and problems of textual criticism. As suggested earlier in my Introduction (p. 8), my analytical framework will utilise the conceptual polarity of *scientia-sapientia* to clarify the two major approaches to scripture embraced by Wyclif's polemic. The first of these is broadly Aristotelian, and sets out to examine the Bible as a complex textual object which offers to its devoted, rationalist student a growing body of information about the way it works.¹¹ The other, broadly Augustinian, looks instead to illumination: the truths of sacred scripture are vouchsafed through prayer and divine grace to him who lives a life of virtue and rectitude.¹² One should stress that this working distinction

of 'approaches' is to an extent artificial, as in practice, the two align themselves in various relationships, of mutual reinforcement as well as of conflict and contradiction.

One of the problems lying at the heart of Wyclif's engagement with scriptural language is that of its metaphoricity or 'improperness'. 'Metaphor', in its foregrounding of the constructedness of linguistic meaning, underlines the determining importance of the perceiving agent or culture.¹³ Wyclif, in his universalising attempt at limiting the cognitive role of the individual – thereby discounting the inevitability of hermeneutic variation – seeks instead to stress the fixity, stability and determinateness of biblical meaning. In this scheme of things, the Bible becomes a coherent system of signifiers informed by an accessible and clarifying divine will. The complexities of biblical language therefore assume a highly problematic status: they must be both acknowledged and transcended.

Towards the beginning of the second chapter of *De Veritate*, Wyclif cites Gregory's remark that the words of the Bible are as leaves to its sentential fruit:

voces enim verborum scripture non sunt nisi ut folia ad fructum sensus proficiencia. unde si obumbrant sensum, si confundunt, si distrahunt vel quomodocunque impediunt, sunt extirpanda, figuranda vel aliter aptanda. (I.21 / 8–11)

For the sounds of the words of scripture are nothing unless as leaves making way for the fruit of sense. Therefore, if they obstruct, confuse, alienate or in any way impede the sense, they are to be plucked out, fashioned ('figured') or otherwise adjusted / made suitable.

If the words obstruct the sense in any way, they are to be rooted out, fashioned (with also the suggestion of 'understood figuratively'), or otherwise adapted, made fit. This clear Gregorian dichotomy of sense and words, with its exhortation to dismiss what is verbally problematic by resorting to a 'sense' already possessed, leads Wyclif to refer yearningly to the state of the blessed who apprehend divine sense supra-linguistically: 'melius foret, ut patet in beatis, capere sententiam sine verbis, si nostra inferioritas non obsesset' ('it were better, as appears in [the case of] the blessed, to apprehend the *sentence* without words, if [only] our inferiority did not hinder [us]') (I.21 / 12–14).¹⁴

The passage just cited in the last section needs to be borne in mind when one examines Wyclif's tussles within and with the realm of language. A key passage in the fourth chapter of *De Veritate* begins with an extended citation of Judges 9:8–15, dealing with the 'parable' of the trees. 'Quid ergo foret ista scriptura nisi fabula vel poema?' ('What therefore would this [piece of] scripture be unless a fable or a poem?'), asks Wyclif (1.63/24). Aristotle is cited as saying that poets lie; Augustine that Jesus's parables are not lies, but, properly understood – 'si bene intelligatur' – 'mysteries'. According to Augustine, from whose *Contra Mendacium* the point is taken, though the narrations be fictive, the significations thereof are true (1.64). Aquinas makes the same point in *De Potencia*: scriptural locutions are metaphorically true (1.65/6).

Having cited his *auctores*, Wyclif proceeds to point out that figurative locutions, which are either metaphorical or similitudinal, are of three kinds: allegorical, parabolical and feigned or fictional (1.65/13–16). The realm of allegory concerns true historical facts which yet signify that which is to be believed in the later church, as for example, the paschal lamb in the Old Testament signifies Christ. 'Allegory' always implies that the narrated events did in fact happen and were recorded in scripture; Gal. 4:22–4 is cited in confirmation (1.65/16–66/14). In parabolic locutions, the scriptural *sentence* is narrated according to some similitude, though the narrated events are not recorded as actual events [*historizata*] in scripture. This is the case with Christ's own parables (1.66/16–19). The third category of figurative language is fictive: when the events narrated are not true literally so that they may signify the truth mystically (1.66/22–4). Wyclif then returns to Judges 9, collecting Augustine as authority on the way. The three trees in the relevant verses from Judges (the olive, the fig and the vine) are three historical figures. 'Per olivam intelligunt Hebrei Othoniel' ('By the olive the Jews understand Othoniel'); Jer. 11:16 is offered as justification of this interpretation, as the tribe of Judah, of which Othoniel was a member, is therein described as an olive tree. By the fig is understood Deborah; and by the vine, Gideon, a member of the tribe of Joseph which is described as a fruitful bough in Gen. 49:22. Further references, to the context of the parable in Judges 9, and to 1 Sam. 8:5,

bolster Wyclif's defence of the biblical verses from the charge of 'falsity' (1.67/1–68/2).

Such a 'contextual' interpretation in terms of the *circumstancia litterae* is however immediately followed by Wyclif's own moralisation:

ex ultima parte fictitie videtur michi notari, quod sacerdotes Cristi, qui debent esse vicarii vitis vere, non debent civiliter dominari, cum conficiunt corpus eius et sangwinem, que letificant deum et homines, sed celebrantes debent memorari eum, qui non potuit civiliter dominari . . . si enim tempore ante legem sine exemplo Cristi persona laica deseruit civilitatem propter devocionem, multo magis sacerdotes Cristi sic facerent exemplo sui magistri. (1.68/3–13)

In the last part, it seems to me to be signified in a fictional manner that the priests of Christ, who must be vicars of the true vine, must not [undertake civil dominion], since they produce his body and blood which delight God and men. Instead, celebrating [the Eucharist], they must remember him who could not [undertake civil dominion] . . . For if in the time before the [New] Law, without the example of Christ, a lay person renounced civil authority for devotion, the priests of Christ should do so much more [according to] the example of their Master.

Note how this reading of the parable as an *exemplum* for priests – they are to renounce all civil dominion – hovers indecisively between the suggestion that the 'fiction' 'intrinsically' carries this meaning, and a more historically aware reading drawing a relevant moral from a quite different cultural circumstance.

Wyclif then returns to the earlier biblical-historical scheme in which the bramble of Judges 9:14 'significat mistice Abymalec' ('signifies Abymalec in a mystical fashion', 1.68/14). The bramble, according to Isidore, is a small shrub which emits fire; therefore it corresponds mystically to the evil act of Abymalec who killed his seventy brothers. The cedars of Judges 9:15 are Abymalec's terrified nobles, for it is often the case in the Bible that noble men are called cedars (1.68/15–22). Wyclif next proceeds to his own individual interpretation. The *doctor* who goes deeper into the scriptural text beyond the particular signified sense will find that its apparent sterility gives way before a hidden mystical sense:

unde preter sensum particularem signatum quidam doctor fodiens profundius scripturam, que videtur tam sterilis, invenit in ea latentem

sensum mysticum de statu universalis ecclesie, sic quod per ligna intelliguntur rudes humani generis, qui ex servitute bestiali appetunt in affectu habere hominem seculariter imperantem, et tales ierunt, quia recesserunt a religione status innocencie et cristi, cum abierunt in concilio impiorum. (1.68/23–69/5)

Therefore, the doctor delving deeper into [this passage of] scripture will find in it, beyond the particular signified sense, which seems so sterile, a hidden mystical sense [pertaining to] the state of the universal Church. Thus by the trees are understood the ignorant / simple of human kind, who, because of their bestial sevitude, desire emotionally [in their *affect*] to have a man ruling [over them] in a worldly manner, and such [men] came into being, because they receded from the [form of] religion of the state of innocence and of Christ when they passed into the council of the impious.

For the reader seeking profundities beyond the immediate, therefore, Judges 9 becomes a parable of the human condition: of fallen man's appetite for power which results in a rejection of Christ himself. The reference to the 'council of the impious' is probably an additional jibe at the ecclesiastical politics of the day: the biblical text is here offering adverse comment on the fallen state of the present-day Church.

The suggestion is drawn out in the passage which follows. The three trees 'are' the three ages of the Church: before the (Old) Law, under the Law and the Church of Christ. Priests of the latter must bear spiritual fruit by rejecting secular dominion and turn instead to matters celestial (1.69/6–21). John 15:1 ('I am the true vine'), and other biblical references to olives, figs and vines¹⁵ are cited in more or less forced confirmation of such an interpretation. By the bramble is understood the antichrist; and this identification leads on to a long passage on those who desire mundane glory. When Wyclif returns to the bramble, the antichrist is compared to the bramble '*rationabiliter*': the evil, through their love of wealth, are divided among themselves like the spines of the bramble (Luke 8:14 is cited – Christ comparing thorns to riches and pleasures); the bramble is sterile like the antichrist; third, just as the bramble causes the light of the sun to be obstructed, similarly, those belonging to the antichrist obscure the similitude of God in their souls (1.71/13–72/1). Wyclif concludes with saying that this sense is the catholic sense intended by the Holy Ghost: '*concluditur esse catholicus*

et a spiritu sancto intentus' (1.72/2–3). The following passage returns to the theme of the clergy's ideal renunciation of civil dominion.

I have discussed Wyclif's treatment of Judges 9 at some length because it is fairly representative of his general procedure in *De Veritate*. There is a discernible interest in supporting 'mystical' interpretations of any scriptural passage with references (often unconvincing, forced and demanding equally 'mystical' readings) to other passages; there is almost always a consolidatory theoretical gesture in the direction of divine intention; there are tormented attempts at showing the substantive rightness of scriptural comparisons, their 'essential' groundedness in 'real' points of similarity between vehicle and tenor; and there is ample scope for Wyclif's own, often idiosyncratic and highly polemical interpretations. What we witness is a practical utilisation of all the hermeneutic liberties offered by a 'parabolic' language, and at the same time a theoretical striving towards a 'sciential' codification of the problems thereof.

It will be useful now to examine Wyclif's theoretical pronouncements on various issues in hermeneutics: 'parabolic' language and the 'literal' sense; authorial intention; the importance of contextual interpretation; scriptural logic and the role of 'reason'; and problems of text and textual criticism.

'IMPROPER' LANGUAGE

The major thrust behind Wyclif's discussion of improper significations is a desire to deny their inevitable ambiguity. His philosophical realism¹⁶ has an important role to play in this, for metaphorical language habitually links together, or has the potential to link together, things not immediately or obviously similar. The main emphasis in Wyclif's theory of predication in *De Universalibus* lies on the transference of predication from the domain of language to that of reality. As Alessandro Conti has pointed out, 'Wyclif hypostatizes the notion of being and considers equivocity, analogy and univocity as real relations between things, and not as semantical relations between terms and things.'¹⁷ In the words of Jesse Gellrich, 'his project was to decentralize language as the matrix for studying the universal: rather than seeking it *post rem* in linguistic events, he sought a return to the classical *universalia ante rem*'.¹⁸ Wyclif

therefore introduces, in his *De Universalibus*, a new, enigmatic category of predication called 'essential predication'. The concept of 'essential predication' in all its metaphysical complexity has been clarified recently by Conti;¹⁹ what needs to be underlined here, however, is the extent of Wyclif's commitment to realism which necessitates the postulation of a new category of predication. Logical conflicts which were traditionally solved by resorting to purely linguistic predication demand, in Wyclif's realist world, new explicatory mechanisms.²⁰ Given such a realist philosophical thrust against the constitutive role of language in our perception of the 'external' world,²¹ it is easier to understand Wyclif's profound unease with metaphor, and indeed, with any figurative language.

Towards the beginning of *De Veritate*, Wyclif takes up Jesus's words in John 10:9 – 'I am the door' – and uses them as a launching pad for a discussion of the equivocity of scriptural language (1.9). 'Equivocal' words vary in meaning according to context, for it is not just names with which we are concerned but also with things. Hence the 'famoso principio logico: in equivocis non est contradiccio, cum non sit nominis tantum, sed rei et nominis' ('the famous logical principle: there is no contradiction in equivocation, since it is not just [a matter] of the part of speech, but of the thing as well as of the part of speech') (1.9/8–10).²² Augustine's explanation of the phrase 'manibus ligwe' from Prov. 18:21 is discussed next. We well know that the tongue has no hands, but the scriptural passage makes sense because what is being referred to is the power of the tongue: 'que sunt manus ligwe? potestates ligwe' (1.10/15–16).

A few passages later, Wyclif comes to discuss the theory of such interpretations: 'ulterius restat videre, ad quem sensus locuciones huiusmodi figurative debent intelligi' ('it further remains to be seen, how [to what senses] figurative locutions of this kind must be understood', 1.14/14–15). Figurative passages must be understood according to the 'mystical', 'spiritual', 'symbolic' and 'proportional' senses. A proposition in mystical theology attributes the name of a creature to God. The conditions of analogy make possible the attribution of the imperfect – the properties according to kind in the creature – to God in an equivocal sense. And this is also true of the names of creatures of one genus being attributed to a creature of another in commendation or vituperation (1.14/16–15/3). The discussion proceeds to examine the status of the word 'lion' in the Bible, which signifies to the rude grammarian

a roaring four-footed beast, but to the theologian, God or the devil (I.I 5/7–9). There follows a long passage demonstrating how the nature of the beast is indeed a proper, ‘real’ analogy for Christ: ‘consideremus itaque naturam illius bestie et videamus, si in Christo possumus reperire analogum’ (‘let us consider the nature of this beast and see if we are able to find an analogy in Christ’, I.I 6/4–5). Various aspects of the lion – its regal status, its roaring, its strength and its peculiar way of bringing its infants to life – are all shown to have parallels in Christ’s being and life (I.I 6/6–I 7/28). The passages which follow undertake a similar demonstration in relation to the lion and the devil (I.I 8/1–I 9/1 6). The section is rounded off with the assertion that all the various names attributed to God in the scriptures can be justified thus: ‘ex quolibet talibus proprietatibus leonis colari potest analogum, propter quod deus analogice foret leo. et ita de quibuscunque nominibus, que scriptura sibi attribuit’ (‘an analogy can be derived from any such property of the lion, on account of which God analogically would be a lion. The [same can be said] of any name that scripture attributes to him’, I.I 9/1 7–20).

What emerges from Wyclif’s discussion of Christ as lion is a desire to smooth out the problematic ambiguity of figurative language, to anchor figures not in the realm of language but in the realm of things: both Christ and the lion participate by virtue of their distinct but related, ‘analogous’ natures in real universals.²³ Wyclif’s realist use of the notion of analogy has been commented on by Conti: ‘Those things are analogical which have the same name and are subordinated to a single concept, but according to different ways. Analogical things *therefore share the nature* signified by that name according to various degrees of intensity.’²⁴ The resemblance of analogous things is not a matter of linguistic convention but of shared natures; in other words, judgments of likeness are perceptions of universals.²⁵

Wyclif returns to the issue of figurative language in the fifth chapter: ‘figurativas locuciones ad sensum mysticum debemus defendere a falsitate, cum sint predicabiles ad sensum plus preciosum’ (‘we must defend from falsity figurative locutions in the mystical sense, since they are predicable in a more precious sense’, I.92/5–7). The critic of figures, according to him, objects that the confusion of things of one species with things of another would result in the death of all systematic thought:

all definitions and distinctions of universals would perish (1.92/111–15). Wyclif goes on to point out, however, that such misgivings arise ‘ex ignorancia sophismatum et logice’ (‘out of ignorance of sophismata and logic’).

conceditur igitur, quod homo est leo, serpens, vermis etc., et sic in qualibet specie tamquam eius principium, ut patet de Cristo, qui est omnia in omnibus et principium cuiuslibet predicati secundum deitatem. verumtamen non est fera vel alia creatura qua homo, et patet, quod non pereunt diffinitiones vel distinciones universalium. (1.92/21–6)

It is conceded therefore that man is a lion, a serpent, a worm etc., and thus [is present] in any species just as if [he were] its principle, as appears in Christ, who is all in everything and, according to [his] deity, the principle of whatever is predicated [of him]. Nevertheless, a wild creature or any other creature is not as man, and it is evident that definitions or distinctions of universals do not perish.

In this new justification of human-animal figures, man is held to be related to all other species just as if he were their principle. He is thus similar in this respect to Christ himself who is the principle of whatever is predicated of him. The issue becomes clearer when Wyclif cites Aristotle as *auctor*: God did not create any creature wiser than man and did not collect in any other animal what he collected in man. Therefore, there is no custom or quality which is not found in man but is found in some other animal; and man is, in other words, a ‘minor mundus’ (1.95/3–96/5).²⁶ Thus, there is no contradiction in such equivocal uses of language according to essential and figural predication: ‘et ista philosophia naturalis [Aristotle’s] est utilis pro intellectu scripture nec est contradiccio in sensibus equivocis secundum predicacionem essencialem et figuralem’ (‘And this natural philosophy is useful for the understanding of scripture; and there is no contradiction in equivocal senses according to essential and figural predication’, 1.96/5–8). The passage is summed up by the citation of yet another *auctoritas*, this time Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*: a passage from Book iv, Prose 3, on the bestialisation of the vicious man, which for Wyclif constitutes yet another recognition of the ‘essential’ validity of comparisons between man and animal. The ‘real’ resemblance lies not indeed in a shared corporeal

species but in shared 'qualities': 'ecce, quomodo homo, medius inter angelos et bestias, virtutibus deificatur, sic viciis bestiatur morum qualitate, non corporis specie' ('see, how man, intermediate between angels and beasts, deified by virtues, is thus bestialised by vices [in terms of] the quality of [his] morals, [though] not [in terms of his] corporeal nature', 1.97/8–10). Otherwise scriptural verses such as John 10:35 ('deus illos dixit deos'); Ps. 22:16 ('circumdederunt me canes multi'); Matt. 7:6 ('neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos'); and Rev. 22:15 ('foris canes et venefici et inpuđici et homicidæ') would all be nullified (1.97/10–18). A few passages later, Ps. 22 is taken up again, this time to discuss verse 6: 'I am a worm and no man'. Such passages, it is alleged, 'non possunt excusari a falsitate de virtute sermonis' ('cannot be excused from falsity by the force of the word', 1.101/12–13).²⁷ But scriptural logic hides profound truths; and in this case the reference is to Christ who was, as Augustine points out, 'sine concubitu instar vermium procreatus' ('begotten without sexual contact in the manner of worms'), and who was not a man 'formaliter' because of his divinity (1.105/27–107/5).

The above passages underline Wyclif's obsessive interest in justifying the domain of figurative language by pointing to 'real' and not merely 'perceived' correspondences between vehicle and tenor. As he points out, there is no contradiction, according to 'essential predication', in this category of scriptural equivocation.

PARABLES

Wyclif's justification of the next form of equivocation – parables – is more complex. The section begins, as usual, with a discussion of the literal sense. It is asserted that 'sensus . . . literalis est utrobique verus, cum non asseritur a recte intelligentibus' ('the literal sense is everywhere true, [even] when it is not affirmed by those understanding [it] rightly', 1.73/5–6). The literal sense is the primary truth ordained by the Holy Ghost to bring forth the other senses. As Aquinas points out, the parabolic sense is contained in the literal. Words signify both properly and figuratively, and the literal sense is not the figure but what is figured. So, when scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that God has a corporeal arm but that he has the power generally associated with an arm (1.73/12–22). 'Ecce', says Wyclif, 'quante sancti doctores

laborarunt ad excusandum scripturam sacram a falsitate' ('how much holy doctors labour to excuse sacred scripture from falsity', 1.73/24–5), and plunges immediately into an extraordinary defence of the 'truth' of parables.

The argument, such as it is, is convoluted. The main point seems to be Wyclif's dissatisfaction with Augustine's apparent acquiescence in the non-literality of parables:

[According to Augustine] 'parabola dicitur, quando datur similitudo de aliquo'. ex quibus colligitur, quod omnes locuciones parabolice ewangelii sunt vere ad sensum, quem debent habere, ut dicit Augustinus. sed difficultas est, si locuciones parabolice sint vere ad literam. et videtur Augustinum sentire, quod sint ficte. (1.74/10–15)

'[A text] is said to be a parable, when a similitude to something is given.' From which it is inferred, as Augustine says, that all parabolic locutions of the gospel are true according to the sense they must have. But the difficulty is whether parabolic locutions are true literally. And Augustine seems to consider that they are feigned.

Wyclif confesses to have speculated often on this conclusion of Augustine's; and it seems to him that neither a parable nor a similitude can exist without a 'solid basis' ('solidum fundamentum'). The similitude cannot be one between truth and the non-existent, that which is not. Indeed, the parable of the prodigal son sounds probable enough, and it seems that Augustine did not consider it false. This is specially the case since the God of truth possesses many truths unknown to us, and by means of these, he can parabolically express truth (1.74/16–75/5). Wyclif therefore concludes that when Augustine says that the parable is not about 'res gesta' – things which actually happened – he perhaps intended to say that they are not about events which are explicitly chronicled elsewhere in scripture: 'et quando Augustinus dicit, quod non sit res gesta, forte intelligit, quod non sit res in scriptura sacra alibi chroni-cata' (1.75/18–20). Hebrews 7:3, in which Paul describes Melchisedec as 'without father, without mother, without descent', is cited in confirmation: the Apostle obviously intended us to 'supply' the qualification that his words meant that Melchisedec's genealogy was not *expresse*²⁸ chronicled in scripture, though it might have been available apocryphally (1.75/22–23). The argument then takes a slight turn, and Augustine

is cited as explaining that some passages of scripture are purely historical, some mystical and some mixed (1.76/21–5). Augustine's queries about the literal truth of the 'res gestae' narrated in the parable of the prodigal son are next cited. What is undeniably true, according to Augustine, is that the lord indeed said these words, but it is not necessary that 'ad literam facta monstrentur' ('that they should be shown to [have happened] literally', 1.77/9). 'Ecce', says Wyclif in yet another of his 'supplementing' readings of the saint: 'videtur [Augustine] dicere quod non exigitur, ut ad literam monstrentur facte parabole, suple, ut inserantur alibi historie in scriptura sacra' ('Augustine seems to be saying that it is not necessary that parables should be shown to have happened literally, [i.e., it is not necessary] that they should have been inserted as actual events elsewhere in sacred scripture', 1.77/13–15). The same argument, says Wyclif, is offered by Grosseteste, when the latter wonders why Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalen. Grosseteste explains that because of the stringent editorial practices of the compilers of the gospels, nothing was written down unless noted by all. Hence John's qualification in 20:30: 'multa fecit Jesus, que non sunt scripta in libro hoc'. There follows a list of the twelve appearances of Christ between his resurrection and his ascension (the first two, pre-Magdalenic, on apocryphal authority) (1.77/22–79/2). Wyclif concludes:

ecce, quam multa vera non sunt expressata in scriptura sacra, que sepe restringit loquelam ad illa, que ibi asseruntur. quando ergo scriptura dicit, quod primo apparuit Marie Magdalene, intelligitur, quantum ad apparicionem in scriptura expressatam, et sic credo, quod loquitur Augustinus. (1.79/3–8)

See, how many truths are not [expressly stated] in sacred scripture, which often restricts the discourse to [those things] which are asserted at that point. Therefore, when scripture says that [Jesus] first appeared to Mary Magdalen, it is understood that [the statement pertains to] apparitions expressly stated in scripture; and thus, I believe, Augustine speaks.

Wyclif returns to the prodigal son a few pages later, once again making the point that the 'history' was true, though narrated by Christ as a parable or a piece of apocrypha (i.e. not expressly present in scripture). The story is also parabolically true according to Jesus's own sense,

which – rather than the historical sense, which nevertheless the parable possesses – is literal in this case (1.82/16–83/5).

The implications of this remarkable piece of parabolic theory are to be noted. The major, and unexpected, point which emerges is the profound ‘realist’ gulf which separates Wyclif from two of his most important *auctores*: Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine has many justifications for figurative language in *De Doctrina Christiana*: exercising the devout mind, concealing truths from the unworthy and so on,²⁹ but underlying all these, as emerges in that classic passage of his, is the rhetorician’s delight – hesitant, faintly apologetic, but nevertheless impressively and movingly articulated – in non-literal uses of language.³⁰ Aquinas, despite his deep unease with figurative language, nevertheless justifies it, in an Aristotelian fashion: ‘human knowledge begins in corporeal sense, and poetic metaphors constitute sensory modes of representation which give us access to the higher “world of intelligence through the world of sense”’.³¹ What informs Wyclif’s discussion of the parable is, however, an extraordinary reluctance to admit that spiritual truths can be communicated by means of ‘fictions’; hence his decision here entirely to ignore the substantial body of medieval discussion about the rhetorical usefulness (or otherwise) of parables.³² Indeed, his discomfort with the notion of fictive truth is such that he actually cites, in an uncharacteristic fashion, apocryphal material as authoritative in his bid to ‘literalise’ or rather ‘realise’ – ‘make real’ – parables.

THE FOUR SENSES OF SCRIPTURE

Wyclif returns to the issue of figurative language later in *De Veritate* in an extended discussion of the traditional four-fold senses of scripture. In one of his key statements in relation to this, he seems to dismiss centuries of debate about the relation between the literal sense and authorial intention. He cites the mnemonic verses ‘litera gesta docet . . .’, and proceeds to state that although whichever sense is possessed by the letter can be called literal *de virtute sermonis*, it is learned custom to describe the literal sense as that which the Holy Ghost first imparted to lead the faithful to God:

quamvis autem quilibet sensus, quem habet litera, possit de virtute sermonis dici congrue literalis, doctores tamen comuniter vocant sensum

literalem scripture sensum, quem spiritus sanctus primo indidit, ut animus fidelis ascendat in deum. (I.I 19/18–120/3)

Although whichever sense the letter has could accordingly, by the force of the word, be said to be literal, nevertheless doctors customarily describe as the literal sense of scripture that sense which the Holy Ghost first imparted so that the faithful soul might ascend to God.

This calm assumption of an identity of the 'literal' sense and divine intention as normative in learned discourse is startling. The interrelationship of the 'literal' sense and various kinds of intention, both human and divine, had indeed exercised past scholars – Aquinas, Lyra and Fitzralph, as we have seen in my Introduction (pp. 11–14), are the most immediately relevant – but such an untroubled definition is not quite so simply endorsed in their work. However, the discussion continues: the [literal] sense is sometimes historical, when talking of the *gesta cristi* and the *gesta patrum*; it is sometimes moral or tropological, as for instance in Deut. 6:5 and Matt. 22:37 (both straightforward exhortations to love God); it is allegorical in verses such as 1 Cor. 10:2 (Paul here describes how '[our fathers] were all baptised unto Moses'); and it is anagogical in passages such as Luke 20:35–6 (Christ's words about the state of the blessed after resurrection) (I.I 20). And the four senses, though distinguished from each other, are not opposed, for the literal sense teaches truth, while the allegorical goes beyond history to teach that which is elsewhere present *ad literam* (I.I 21/4–9). As example, we are offered Gen. 17 and Gal. 4:22–4: the former narrates the story of Abraham's sons, while the latter draws out *ad literam* the meaning inherent in the history. Abraham thus signifies God the Father and his two sons the two testaments. Reading scripture according to the first sense without the second elicits only the historical meaning; when the second sense is superadded, one gets the allegorical significance (I.I 21/16–20). The *Doctor Subtilis* is next quoted: whatever is not literal in one part of scripture is literally present in another; and therefore, though some passages may have many senses, scripture in its entirety has all these senses for the literal sense (I.I 22/2–6). Wyclif then asserts that he has come across no relevant *doctor* who would dissent from such an analysis, though some of the more misguided ones might believe that the senses are nowhere mixed. Raban Maur is next cited as *auctor*: the advantage

of simultaneous history and allegory lies in their separate uses: the slow are fed by history and the quick by allegory (I.I 22/6–I 2). Returning to Gen. 17, Wyclif proceeds to point out that if one of the faithful were to understand *pure* ('simply') the mystical sense of the passage, without discrediting the history, the allegorical sense would be to this reader literal. And thus, since the sense of scripture is the truth ordained therein by the Holy Ghost, it seems that the literal and allegorical senses are the same. In passages without a historical sense, the literal and allegorical senses are identical. In other words, the first 'orthodox' sense conceived by the reader of a particular scriptural passage is the literal (I.I 22/I 4–25).

Wyclif goes on to emphasise the point that the literal sense is to be sought after everywhere, even though its precise nature varies: 'utrobique enim tenendus est sensus literalis, qui quandoque est nude historicus, quandoque allegoricus, et quandoque mixtim' ('for the literal sense is to be sought after everywhere, which sometimes is nakedly historical, sometimes allegorical and sometimes mixed', I.I 23/6–8). The moral or tropological sense sometimes has a prior historical sense, and sometimes is, *immediate*, the literal sense. The three senses are ultimately summed up thus: the allegorical teaches *mediate* or *immediate* what is to be believed; the anagogical what is to be hoped, and the tropological what is to be done meritoriously. They thus correspond to faith, hope and charity. The three senses are 'literal' when elicited *immediate* from scripture and either allegorical, tropological or anagogical when elicited *mediate*.³³

The important point here is Wyclif's vacillation between a revolutionary concept of the 'literal' as that sense intended by God in all its 'spiritual' fullness, and a second, more traditional concept of the 'literal' as the surface or historical sense which is the basis for deeper, 'mediately elicited' significances. The problem, unnoticed or at least unacknowledged by Wyclif, is that the first concept – the 'literal' sense as God's spiritual plenitude – makes all the traditional categories of hermeneutic analysis, to which he nevertheless subscribes, redundant. It is perhaps worthwhile to point out here that the vocabulary of *mediate* and *immediate* had a long prehistory in medieval epistemological discourse,³⁴ and, most relevantly for our purposes, in the debates of Aquinas, Giles of Rome and others about the knowability and intelligibility of the divine nature, and the role of the human mind in conceiving God. As Hester Gelber explains, there was substantial disagreement among thinkers over

whether human concepts of God had an 'immediate'³⁵ foundation in the divine essence, or whether such concepts were 'mediate', i.e., having their foundation primarily in human modes of understanding.³⁶ Wyclif's use of the terms here I find problematic and self-contradictory, a point to which I will return, but the epistemological concerns underlying their use come to the fore clearly in the passages which follow.

The tormented attempt at codifying scriptural signification that I have been charting is succeeded by a remarkable passage in which Wyclif denies the constitutive role played by the perceiving intellect in the creation of meaning. He speaks of a past stage in his career when he tried to distinguish between the four senses 'ex opposito', defining the 'true' sense of scripture as not only the one intended by its author, but 'agregatum' from that and the mode of our understanding:

quandoque autem contendebam distingwendo hos quatuor sensus ex opposito per rangas inutiles, vocando sensum non solum veritatem, quam autor asserit de scriptura, sed agregatum ex illo et modo intelligendi nostro.³⁷ (I.I 24/3–7)

But at one time, I strove to distinguish these four senses in the opposite way / through opposition by useless lines of division, describing as the sense [of scripture] not only the truth which the author of scripture asserts, but aggregated from it [the sense] and the mode of our understanding.

Later, it seemed to him that such a conceptualisation was unacceptable: 'infundabilem et superflue onerosum' ('ungroundable and unnecessarily burdensome'). The true sense is one on which the eyes of God are fixed eternally, for he himself is the sense which we seek in scripture. Moreover, the distinction of the senses would not apply to such an 'aggregated' sense, since the latter would be neither historical nor mystical nor signified by scripture, but would vary according to the modes of human understanding (I.I 25/8–16). Taking the act of conceiving for what is conceived (i.e. the sense of scripture), whether that act be erroneous or catholic, is irrational and ungrounded (I.I 25/17–20). Only that sense which God and the blessed read in the book of life is always true and invariable. If any apparent errors are found in scripture, they are those of the reader, of the 'wrongly conceiving' – 'error male concipientis'. Scripture must be understood 'pure catholice' ('exclusively in a

catholic sense'), and extraneous fallen senses should not be mixed with the catholic sense (I.I 27/18–21). The intellect should be brought back from the realm of 'impossible senses' to that of 'catholic contemplation'. The blessed do not elicit wavering senses from scripture. False interpretations rip the creator apart in the text of scripture; 'carnal' and 'noxious' cogitations must therefore be put to death against the stone of justice (this from the Gloss on Psalm 137) (I.I 27/23–I 29/1).

I have outlined Wyclif's 'argument' in so extended a fashion because it is important to realise the multidirectional quality of his thought and its dizzying, often contradictory movements. Wyclif is in these passages very much struggling to articulate what is in effect a new hermeneutic discourse while being caught in inherited categories of analysis. This emerges most clearly in his discussion of the traditional four-fold scheme of interpretation. There is a major dichotomy in his argument: if the literal sense is synonymous with the divine authorial intention, which intention naturally informs the whole of the Bible, the postulation of meanings elicited *mediate* and *immediate* becomes problematic. Either one accesses the divine intention – through whatever means – and achieves what by definition ought to be the *immediate* meaning, or one does not get God's meaning at all. The notion of meanings elicited *mediate* is based on a fundamental recognition of the constitutive role played by the perceiving intellect and its analytical categories in the construction of relevant 'meaning'. The sphere of 'mediate' meanings encompasses intellectual discourses – some of which I will be examining – which would play an important role in the Lollard heresy: interpretative or ecclesiastical traditions (as in William Woodford); hierarchy (as in William Butler); hermeneutic desire in the disputant or in the contemplative reader (Nicholas Love); inventive exegesis and 'adapted meanings' used for homiletic and polemical purposes. But what all of these categories foreground is the interactive, dialogic nature of scriptural meaning. Wyclif's profound but uneasy commitment to a non-discursive and monologic apprehension of divine truth emerges with a remarkable clarity in the passage which we have been examining; and it is no accident that the discussion of the four-fold exegetical model leads seamlessly into a discussion of perception, and an affirmation of the independence of known object from knowing subject.

It is worthwhile to chart the larger argumentative movement in the section I have been outlining: from a recognition of the multiple significances of a figurative scriptural language and an attempt to contain the fluidity of these significances while accommodating the traditional schema of analysis which was based on irreconcilable cognitive premisses, Wyclif moves to a dismissal of these premisses which postulate the necessary dependence of significance on the perceiving mind. Finally, he arrives at a categorical disjunction of a transcendent realm of an ideal catholic sense from that of a wavering fallen earthly hermeneutics.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Wyclif does go on to postulate a Fall which is above all hermeneutic: 'exhinc enim cecidit genus humanum a statu innocencie temptacione diaboli, qui fuit primus questionista scriptura falsificans' ('for mankind fell as a result of this from the state of innocence through the temptation of the devil, who was the first questionist³⁸ falsifying scripture', 1.1 29/20-2). Eve, we are told, was seduced because the devil perceived how she did not hesitate to adulterate God's words:

serpens callidus quesivit rationem huius scripture [the divine prohibition in Gen. 2:1 6-1 7], cui suffecisset allegasse autoritatem mandantis, cum fides scripture sit principium propinquius primo principio quam principio vel [*sic*] maxime sciencie doctrinalis. sed mulier ex sinistro conceptu scripture non ipsam falsificavit, sed dubitavit dicens, quod 'de fructu ligni, quod est in medio paradisi, precepit deus, nec comederent ne tangerent, ne forte moriantur', et statim diabolus videns hominem in fide scripture titubantem et ex alio latere ad scripturam sacram prohibitionem tactus ligni monstruose addentem, ac si mandatum domini vellet corrigere vel gravare, statim mentitus est, scripture domini contradicens: 'nequaquam', inquit, 'moriemini' et sic seductum est genus humanum ex defectu sensus scripture.³⁹ (1.1 29/27-3 0/1 3)

The sly serpent questioned the reason of this piece of scripture. It would have sufficed to have alleged to him the authority of the law-giver, since the faith of scripture is a principle closer to the First Principle than to that of the highest doctrinal science. But the woman, out of her perverse concept of scripture, did not indeed falsify it, but doubted, saying: 'Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die'. And the devil, instantly seeing that man was wavering

in the faith of scripture, and monstrosly adding to holy scripture from elsewhere the prohibition relating to touching the tree, as if he wished to correct or burden the divine mandate, immediately lied, and contradicting the scripture of the Lord, said: 'Ye shall not surely die.' And thus mankind was seduced because of forsaking the sense of scripture.

Eve altered the specific words of the divine prohibition and added a gratuitous reference to 'touching' the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:3), as if she wished to correct or 'burden' the divine mandate, thereby making it clear to the devil that she was wavering in the faith and therefore ripe for seduction. The postulation of such a Fall, brought about as a result of hermeneutic perversity,⁴⁰ seems almost inevitable in Wyclif's vision of scripture with its all-important *décalage* between biblical certitude – synonymous with the original ideas in God's mind – and the wavering and disabled realm of the human apprehension of meaning (the domain of hermeneutics).

The self-conflicted analysis of the nature of the 'literal sense' arising from such a vision of scripture characterises Wyclif's discussion of the four senses not only in *De Veritate* but also in his commentary on Gal. 4:24. We find the standard statements about the 'literal' sense: it is the basis for the superstructure of the other senses,⁴¹ like the foundation of a building; it is the only sense on which arguments can be based.⁴² Almost in the same breath – and this is the key move – the 'literal' sense is identified with the divine authorial intention; and a new category of 'sensus litteralem multiplicem' is postulated. The multiplex literal sense is evidenced in passages such as 2 Sam. 7:14 ('I will be his father') which applies *ad litteram* to both Christ and Solomon, insofar as the latter prefigures the former. Otherwise the Pauline use of the verse in Hebrews 1:5 as applying to Christ would be unauthorised. That the verse also applies to Solomon is evident from 1 Kings 5:5. When therefore an apostle or some other scriptural writer expresses a particular scriptural sense, that sense is as authentic as the literal, since there are no grades of authorisation of senses in scripture (i.e. the whole of scripture, as God's Word, is of equal authority). The apostle knows the 'full' sense of the passage from the Old Testament as authentically as Moses, Solomon, and so on.⁴³ Therefore, from the same passage of scripture, four men might have four distinct senses, all of which are 'literal': these are the